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Charmed, I'm Sure

The Ethics Of Love Spells

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To gain the love of someone: On a night of the full moon, walk to a spot beneath your beloved's bedroom window, and whisper his/her name three times to the nightwind.
--Ozark love spell

It seems to be an immutable law of nature. You are interviewed by a local radio or TV station, or in some local newspaper. The topic of the interview is Witchcraft or Paganism, and you spend the better part of an hour brilliantly articulating your beliefs, your devotion to Goddess and nature, the difference between Witchcraft and Satanism, and generally enlightening the public at large. The next day, you are flooded with calls. Is it people complimenting you on such a splendid interview? No. People wanting to find out more about the religion of Wicca? Huh-uh. People who are even vaguely interested in what you had to say??? Nope. Who is it? It's people asking you to do a love spell for them!

This used to drive me nuts. I'd take a deep breath and patiently explain (for the thousandth time) why I won't even do love spells for myself, let alone anyone else. This generally resulted in my caller becoming either angry or defensive, but seldom more enlightened. 'But don't you DO magic?', they ask. 'Only occasionally,' I answer. 'And aren't most magic spells love spells?', they persist. That was the line I really hated, because I knew they were right! At least, if you look at the table of contents of most books on magic, you'll find more love spells than any other kind. This seems as true for the medieval grimoire as for the modern drugstore paperback.

Why? Why so many books containing so many love spells? Why such an emphasis on a kind of magic that I, personally, have always considered very negative? And to make matters even more confusing, the books that do take the trouble of dividing spells between 'positve' and 'negative' magic invariably list love spells under the first heading. After all, they would argue, love is a good thing. There can never be too much of it. Therefore, any spell that brings about love must be a GOOD spell. Never mind that the spell puts a straightjacket on another's free will, and then drops it in cement for good measure.

And that is why I had always assumed love magic to be negative magic. Years ago, one of the first things I learned as a novice Witch was something called the Witch's Rede, a kind of 'golden rule' in traditional Witchcraft. It states, 'An it harm none, do what thou will.' One uses this rede as a kind of ethical litmus test for a spell. If the spell brings harm to someone -- anyone (including yourself!) -- then don't do it! Unfortunately, this rule contains a loophole big enough to fly a broom through. It's commonly expressed, 'Oh, this won't HARM them; it's really for their own good.' When you hear someone say that, take cover, because something especially nasty is about to happen.

That's why I had to develop my own version of the Witch's Rede. Mine says that if a spell harms anyone, OR LIMITS THEIR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT OR ACTION IN ANY WAY, then consider it negative, and don't do it. Pretty strict, you say? Perhaps. But there's another law in Witchcraft called the Law of Threefold Return. This says that whatever power you send out, eventually comes back to you three times more powerful. So I take no chances. And love spells, of the typical make-Bobby-love-me type, definitely have an impact on another's free will.

So why are they so common? It's taken me years to make peace with this, but I think I finally understand. The plain truth is that most of us NEED love. Without it, our lives are empty and miserable. After our basic survival needs have been met, we must have affection and companionship for a full life. And if it will not come of its own accord, some of us may be tempted to FORCE it to come. And nothing can be as painful as loving someone who doesn't love you back. Consequently, the most common, garden-variety spell in the world is the love spell.

Is there ever a way to do a love spell and yet stay within the parameters of the Witch's Rede? Possibly. Some teachers have argued that if a spell doesn't attempt to attract a SPECIFIC person into your life, but rather attempts to attract the RIGHT person, whomever that may be, then it is not negative magic. Even so, one should make sure that the spell finds people who are 'right' for each other -- so that neither is harmed, and both are made happy.

Is there ever an excuse for the make-Bobby-love-me type of spell? Without endorsing this viewpoint, I must admit that the most cogent argument in its favor is the following: Whenever you fall in love with someone, you do everything in your power to impress them. You dress nicer, are more attentive, witty, and charming. And at the same time, you unconsciously set in motion some very powerful psychic forces. If you've ever walked into a room where someone has a crush on you, you know what I mean. You can FEEL it. Proponents of this school say that a love spell only takes the forces that are ALREADY there -- MUST be there if you're in love -- and channels them more efficiently.

But the energy would be there just the same, whether or not you use a spell to focus it.

I won't attempt to decide this one for you. People must arrive at their own set of ethics through their own considerations. However, I would call to your attention all the cautionary tales in folk magic about love spells gone awry. Also, if a love spell has been employed to join two people who are not naturally compatible, then one must keep pumping energy into the spell. And when one finally tires of this (and one will, because it is hard work!) then the spell will unravel amidst an emotional and psychic hurricane that will make the stormiest divorces seem calm by comparison. Not a pretty picture.

It should be noted that many spells that pass themselves off as love spells are, in reality, sex spells. Not that there's anything surprising in that, since our most basic needs usually include sex. But I think we should be clear from the outset what kind of spell it is. And the same ethical standards used for love spells can often be applied to sex spells. Last year, the very quotable Isaac Bonewits, author of 'Real Magic', taught a sex magic class here at the Magick Lantern, and he tossed out the following rule of thumb: Decide what the mundane equivalent of your spell would be, and ask yourself if you could be arrested for it. For example, some spells are like sending a letter to your beloved in the mail, whereas other spells are tantamount to abduction. The former is perfectly legal and normal, whereas the latter is felonious.

One mitigating factor in your decisions may be the particular tradition of magic you follow. For example, I've often noticed that practitioners of Voudoun (Voodoo) and Santeria seem much more focused on the wants and needs of day-to-day living than on the abstruse ethical considerations we've been examining here. That's not a value

judgement -- just an observation. For example, most followers of Wicca STILL don't know how to react when a Santerian priest spills the blood of a chicken during a ritual -- other than to feel pretty queasy. The ethics of one culture is not always the same as another.

And speaking of cultural traditions, another consideration is how a culture views love and sex. It has often been pointed out that in our predominant culture, love and sex are seen in very possessive terms, where the beloved is regarded as one's personal property. If the spell uses this approach, treating a person as an object, jealously attempting to cut off all other relationships, then the ethics are seriously in doubt. However, if the spell takes a more open approach to love and sex, not attempting to limit a person's other relationships in any way, then perhaps it is more defensible. Perhaps. Still, it might be wise to ask, Is this the kind of spell I'd want someone to cast on me?

Love spells. Whether to do them or not. If you are a practitioner of magic, I dare say you will one day be faced with the choice. If you haven't yet, it is only a matter of time. And if the answer is yes, then which spells are ethical and which aren't? Then you, and only you, will have to decide whether 'All's fair in love and war', or whether there are other, higher, metaphysical considerations.

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Last modified: August 19 2018 14:51:41